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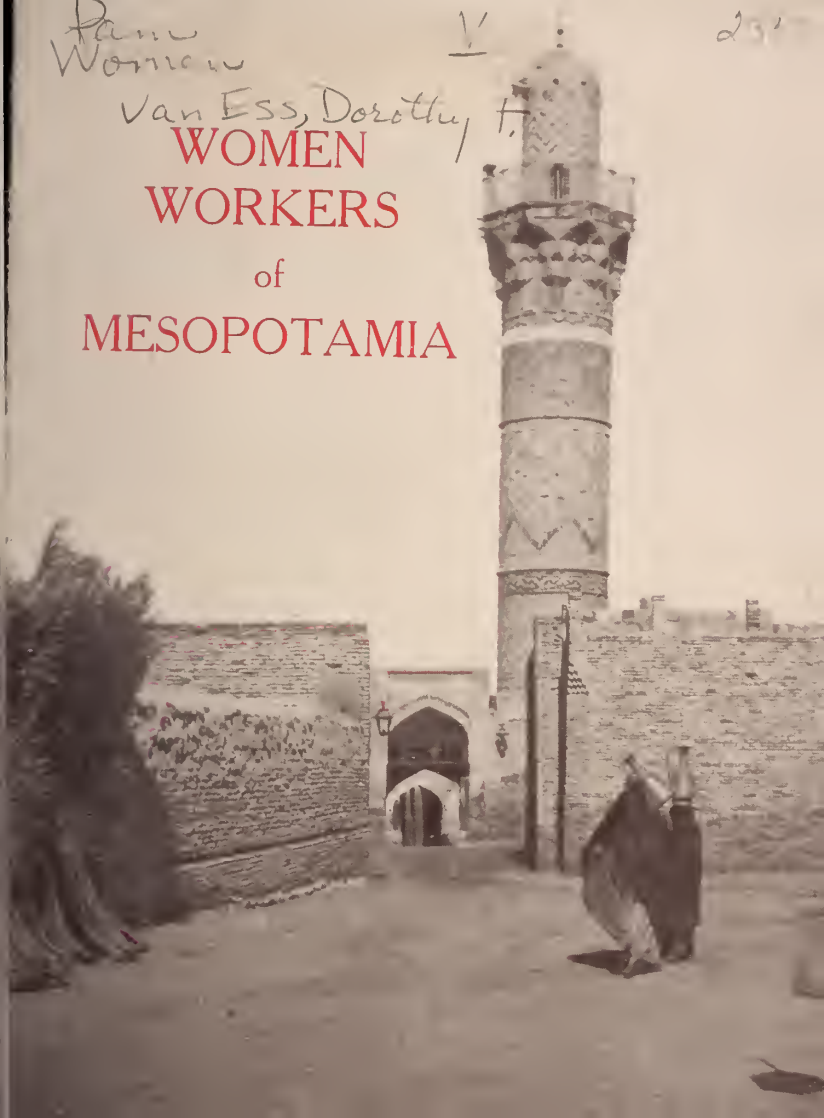
WOMEN WORKERS of MESOPOTAMIA



THE ARAB WOMEN CLEANING RICE

Women Workers of Mesopotamia

By Dorothy Firman Van Ess

THE women of Arabia, as of all Mohammedan lands, are for obvious reasons not economic units in the sense in which the women of the western world are. The whole social system of Islam, based on the seclusion of women, renders work outside the home practically impossible. In Busrah two small but conspicuous groups form an exception—the "Khawat Rezna,"* coolie women; and the women of the Ma'adan* Arabs.

The Khawat Rezna live in a small village of their own, near town, but entirely separate and apart. They do the heaviest sort of coolie work and are always in evidence singly or in bands in the bazaars and along the creeks where the native freight boats unload. They are unveiled, garments girt up around their knees, and are as bold of countenance and speech as they are hardy of physique. There is a

* See page 10 for pronunciation vocabulary.

picturesqueness about them, for they wear their dowries on their persons, in the form of long heavy chains of silver coins. Their dispositions are truculent, and noisy quarrels among themselves or with the passersby are frequent. Their hardness is of character as well as of body and because of this and their very separateness from the rest of mankind they are exceedingly hard to reach.

The Ma'adan Arabs are the people of the marshes, who live in reed huts and have herds of water buffaloes. They are looked down on alike by town Arabs and by the Bedouins, the tent dwellers of the desert, who own no kinship with them. Their women do not veil and can be seen plying up and down the creeks and canals in tiny rough canoes, in which they come from their marsh homes bringing milk, curds and cheeses for sale. Their physique and type of face are rather suggestive of the American Red Indians, but they are dirty and their standards of living are low.

The date-packing industry employs women of both these groups during the date-harvest time, and also some few of the poorer class women, whose desire for the wages is greater than their objection to the semi-publicity of the date camps.

But the great majority of Arab women live their lives within the walls and courtyards of the harem. In the villages, servants are rare, save in the great houses of landed proprietors, but in town there is decidedly a servant class. Nearly every establishment of any means has one or more women servants in the harem, either Arabs or Persians or black women of African descent, and most important functionaries they are. Besides the actual house-

work, they represent the newspaper, the post, and the telephone, for they go to and fro between the houses of the mistresses and their friends doing the errands, carrying the messages and passing on all the gossip of the day. They do the marketing and the shopping, and are in general the go-between for the world without and the world behind the lattices. On the day when women are admitted to the Turkish baths, the servants form part of the black-cloaked household procession, carrying the baskets of towels and clean clothes, and usually a *samovar* and tea glasses, so that refreshment may be prepared after the more arduous pleasures of the bath are concluded. They participate in all the concerns of their mistresses and enjoy terms of great freedom and equality in most cases.

With the servant class may be grouped the midwives and the professional mourners, as well as the bands of black women who are hired to beat the drums at wedding festivities; also the comparatively small number of women who go about to sew or to carry silks, laces, ribbons, and odd haberdashery to different houses to sell on commission. Somewhat harder to classify are the "*mullahas*"*—the female priests, or readers, as it is more correct to term them, since their function is to read and teach the Koran. They correspond to the teaching profession, but may no more fairly be compared to them than the midwives to trained nurses and doctors. Their sole literary equipment is knowledge of the Koran by heart, that they may recite it for those women who cannot themselves read or write, and that they may teach it to the rising generation. The small fraction of Moham-

medan girls who go to school at all attend these dirty little Koran schools, unorganized and undisciplined, and usually much worse than nothing in the way of intellectual training. All lessons are studied aloud and the greater the uproar, the more successful the school, presumably. The *mullaha's* main concern is her fees. The best type of *mullahas* are not the teachers of the Koran school, but the women—often of position and property—who officiate at religious readings during the month of Moharram, the great Shiah* celebration. One occasionally meets women of great originality and force in these high positions, but like all exalted places, they are rare.

ARAB WOM

If we mention the occasional withered crone sunning herself on a street corner behind a little tray of peanuts and dried seeds for sale, we have enumerated practically the whole list of "work open to women" in Mesopotamia.

WATER JARS

The great body of Mohammedan women, there as everywhere, find their work in their own homes. The middle and upper classes in a city are, as we have seen, circumscribed. The poorer classes, in both town and country, have greater freedom to compensate for harder physical labor. They grind their own wheat, pound their own coffee, do their own marketing, and carry their own clothes and pots and pans to wash in the creek or river, among their chattering, though veiled, group of neighbors. A

ARAB LADIES

country courtyard has calves and chickens and geese and babies all mixed up together in it, perhaps an old woman spinning in one corner, and her buxom daughter-in-law baking the flat cakes of Arab bread on the inside of the built-up outdoor oven in another corner.

It is on the great country estates that the almost feudal character of some phases of Arab life may be seen. The tillers of the soil are born on the place, live their lives and do their work there, and there die—likewise the indoor servants. It is a whole little world in itself, and the mistresses of such establishments have no small task to administer the domestic economy of households numbering hundreds of people. The different women of a family have their individual cares, but there is usually some one person—be she mother or chief wife—who holds the reins of control with firm and autocratic hand. Everyone who lives under the spreading rambling roofs must be fed and clothed, preserves and pickles must be put up in their season; store rooms filled ceiling high with mattresses and pillows must be kept in readiness, for if a *sheikh* of a neighboring tribe comes on a visit his retinue may run into hundreds. Kitchens

WOMAN BAKING BREAD

must be stocked with fuel and cooking utensils to meet the demands of such possible guests, and bags of rice, tins of "ghee" or fat and all other supplies must be stored and accounted for. Often an especially capable head wife will be treasurer not only of her own part of the establishment but of all her husband's affairs. We were once visiting an Arab *sheikh* who had recently received an honorary title from King George and he remarked, "I should like to show you my decoration, but the Bibi Khanum* has it. She keeps all my valuables locked up safely for me." The personal affairs of all the servants, even unto the third and fourth generation are overseen and advised by this same Bibi Khanum, and all matters of importance relating to anyone in the household are referred to her. Great are her responsibilities

and great her opportunities, and well to be on the right side of her!

These, high and low, are the women of today in Mesopotamia. A little group who will be women tomorrow are gathered in a little mission school on Busrah creek, and from among them we shall look for the trail-makers of the new era.

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Khawat Rezna, pronounced Khă-wāt′ Rĕz′-nă.

Ma'adan, pronounced Mā-ă-dān′.

Mullaha, pronounced moo-lie′-yă.

Moharram, pronounced Mō-hā′-răm.

Shiah, pronounced Shē′-ă. The sect of Mohammedans who represent in Islam what Catholics are to Christianity. The Sunnis (pronounced Soon-ees) correspond to Protestants.

Bibi Khanum, pronounced Bee′-bee Khā′-nŭm. An honorary title corresponding to "Lady," and used for women of high birth.

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